

# Uṇṇābha Brāhmaṇa Sutta

## The Discourse to the Brahmin Uṇṇābha

[The 5 physical sense-faculties do not overlap]

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 48.42/5:217-219)

Translated by Piya Tan ©2009

### 1 Sutta summary

**The Brāhmaṇa Uṇṇābha Sutta** (S 48.42) is a dialogue between the brahmin Uṇṇābha and the Buddha, centering on statement that each of the five physical sense-faculties (*pañc'indriya*) have their own “range and field” (*visaya, gocara*) [§2-3]. Their common range and field, however, is the mind (*mano, paṭisaraṇa*) [§4], meaning that these five physical senses arise dependent on the mind (*mano*).<sup>1</sup> Not only does the mind experience the five physical senses, but this is where *synaesthesia* is possible, where the senses influence and affect one another [2].

On being further questioned by Uṇṇābha, the Buddha explains that the mind’s resort (*paṭisaraṇa*)<sup>2</sup> is mindfulness (*sati*) [§5], which in turn resorts to liberation (*vimutti*) [§6], which in turn resorts to nirvana. The Buddha then declares that further questioning is meaningless as nirvana is the final goal. Clearly here, *paṭisaraṇa* has the sense of “goal, ideal.”

Uṇṇābha fully understands the Buddha’s teaching and in due course attains non-return [§§9-12]. The Commentary explains that he attains dhyana and becomes a “dhyana non-returner” (*jhāna, anāgāmita*).<sup>3</sup> This is one of the rare examples where a lay person becomes a non-returner.<sup>4</sup>

### 2 Synaesthesia

**2.1 THE SCIENTIFIC VIEW.** Synaesthesia is a neurologically based phenomenon in which stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway leads to automatic, involuntary experiences in a second sensory or cognitive pathway.<sup>5</sup> People who report such experiences are known as *synaesthetes*. In one common form of synaesthesia, known as grapheme or color-graphemic synaesthesia, letters or numbers are perceived as inherently colored,<sup>6</sup> while in ordinal linguistic personification,<sup>7</sup> numbers, days of the week and months of the year evoke personalities.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> As in **Mahā Vedalla S** (M 43), where Sāriputta tells this to Mahā Koṭṭhita (M 43.21/1:295) = SD 30.2.

<sup>2</sup> *Paṭisaraṇa* lit means “resorting to, having recourse to,” that is, being functionally dependent upon. However, it has other senses, eg, taking something: (1) as the ideal (*dhama, paṭisaraṇa*, Kvu 3.1.2/228), (2) as the standard (*gotta, paṭisārī*, D 3.1/1:99). Comys tend to use it in a more concrete sense as “shelter, refuge,” as in “it is *duggati* because it is the destiny, the refuge, of suffering,” *dukkhassa gati paṭisaraṇan ti duggati* (DA 2:544; MA 2:37; AA 1:57; UA 418; ItA 1:72; cf SA 3:245; VvA 231). See S:W 5:193 n1.

<sup>3</sup> See §12 n below on *jhāna, anāgāmita*.

<sup>4</sup> For other examples of lay non-returners, see **Laymen Saints** = SD 8.6 (9-10).

<sup>5</sup> **Richard E Cytowic**, *Synaesthesia: A Union of the Senses* (2nd ed). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002; *The Man Who Tasted Shapes*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003. **Richard E Cytowic & David M Eagleman**, *Wednesday is Indigo Blue: Discovering the Brain of Synesthesia* (with an afterword by Dmitri Nabokov), Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009: 309. **John E Harrison & Simon Baron-Cohen**, *Synaesthesia: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996. For details, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synaesthesia>.

<sup>6</sup> **AN Rich & JB Mattingley**, “Anomalous perception in synaesthesia: a cognitive neuroscience perspective,” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 3,1 Jan 2002: 43-52. **EM Hubbard & VS Ramachandran**, “Neurocognitive mechanisms of synesthesia,” *Neuron* 48,3 Nov 2005: 509-520.

<sup>7</sup> A form of synaesthesia in which ordered sequences, such as ordinal numbers, days, months and letters are associated with personalities (J Simner & EM Hubbard, “Variants of synaesthesia interact in cognitive tasks: Evidence for implicit associations and late connectivity in cross-talk theories,” *Neuroscience* 143,3 2006: 805-814). See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ordinal\\_linguistic\\_personification](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ordinal_linguistic_personification).

<sup>8</sup> J Simner & E Holoenstein, “Ordinal linguistic personification as a variant of synesthesia,” *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 19,4 Apr 2007: 694-703.

In spatial-sequence, or number form<sup>9</sup> synaesthesia, numbers, months of the year, or days of the week evoke precise locations in space (for example, 1980 may be “farther away” than 1990), or may have a (three-dimensional) view of a year as a map (clockwise or counterclockwise).<sup>10</sup> Yet another recently identified type, visual motion sound synaesthesia, involves hearing sounds in response to visual motion and flicker.<sup>11</sup>

Over 60 types of synaesthesia have been reported by people,<sup>12</sup> but only a fraction has been evaluated by scientific research.<sup>13</sup> Even within one type, synaesthetic perceptions vary in intensity<sup>14</sup> and people vary in awareness of their synaesthetic perceptions.<sup>15</sup>

While cross-sensory metaphors (eg “loud shirt,” “bitter wind” or “prickly laugh”) are sometimes described as “synaesthetic,” true neurological synaesthesia is involuntary. It is estimated that synaesthesia could possibly be as prevalent as 1 in 23 persons across its range of variants.<sup>16</sup> Synaesthesia runs strongly in families, but the precise mode of inheritance has yet to be ascertained. Synaesthesia is also sometimes reported by individuals under the influence of psychedelic drugs, after a stroke, during a temporal lobe epilepsy seizure, or as a result of blindness or deafness.

Synaesthesia that arises from such non-genetic events is referred to as “adventitious synaesthesia” to distinguish it from the more common *congenital* forms of synaesthesia. Adventitious synaesthesia involving drugs or stroke (but not blindness or deafness) apparently only involves sensory linkings such as sound vision or touch hearing. There are few, if any, reported cases involving culture-based, learned sets such as graphemes, lexemes, days of the week, or months of the year.

Although synaesthesia was the topic of intensive scientific investigation in the late 1800s and early 1900s, it was largely abandoned by scientific research in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and has only recently been rediscovered by modern researchers.<sup>17</sup> Psychological research has demonstrated that synaesthetic experiences can have measurable behavioral consequences, while functional neuroimaging<sup>18</sup> studies have identified differences in patterns of brain activation.<sup>19</sup> Many people with synaesthesia use their experiences to aid in their creative process, and many non-synaesthetes have attempted to create works of art that may capture what it is like to experience synaesthesia. Psychologists and neuroscientists study synaesthesia not only for its inherent interest, but also for the insights it may give into cognitive and perceptual processes that occur in synaesthetes and non-synaesthetes alike.<sup>20</sup>

**2.2 THE BUDDHIST VIEW.** From the **Brāhmaṇa Uṇṇābha Sutta**, it is clear that synaesthesia does not occur at the physical sense level [§§2-3], but on the mental level [§4]. Each physical sense-organ is a specialized set of tissues and structures that function to “sense” or detect form (space), sound (wind), smell (water), taste (fire) and touches (earth), that is, the four primary elements and space. **The eye** makes sense of space (*ākāsa*) and detects light and colours. **The ear** detects wind (*vāyo*) or motion, that is, vibration or sound, but which also includes other bodily “winds,” such as peristalsis (passage of ingested food,

<sup>9</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Number\\_form](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Number_form).

<sup>10</sup> F Galton, “Visualized Numerals,” *Nature* 22 1880: 494 f; X Seron, M Pesenti, MP Noël, G Deloche, JA Cornet (August 1992). “Images of numbers, or ‘When 98 is upper left and 6 sky blue’,” *Cognition* 44,1-2 Aug 1992: 159-196; N Sagiv, J Simner, J Collins, B Butterworth, J Ward, “What is the relationship between synaesthesia and visuo-spatial number forms?” *Cognition* 101,1 Aug 2006: 114-128.

<sup>11</sup> M Saenz & C Koch, “The sound of change: visually-induced auditory synesthesia,” *Current Biology* 18,15 Aug 2008: R650–R651.

<sup>12</sup> Sean Day, “Types of synesthesia,” 2009: <http://home.comcast.net/~sean.day/html/types.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synesthesia#cite\\_note-campen2007-13](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synesthesia#cite_note-campen2007-13).

<sup>14</sup> EM Hubbard, AC Arman, VS Ramachandran, GM Boynton, “Individual differences among grapheme-color synesthetes: brain-behavior correlations,” *Neuron* 45,6 Mar 2005: 975-985.

<sup>15</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synesthesia#cite\\_note-campen2007-13](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synesthesia#cite_note-campen2007-13).

<sup>16</sup> Cretien van Campen, “The Hidden Sense: On Becoming Aware of Synesthesia,” TECCOGS v1 2009: 1-13.

<sup>17</sup> C Campen, “Artistic and psychological experiments with synesthesia,” *Leonardo* 32,1 1999: 9-14.

<sup>18</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Functional\\_neuroimaging](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Functional_neuroimaging).

<sup>19</sup> EM Hubbard & VS Ramachandran, “Neurocognitive mechanisms of synesthesia,” *Neuron* 48,3 Nov 2005: 509-520.

<sup>20</sup> This section is based on <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synesthesia>, for which see details.

bowel movement, etc). The **nose** senses water (*āpo*), which is actually the *cohesiveness* of matter, what holds it together. “Water” as liquid is a phase of matter in between earth (solid) and wind (gas), which includes smell molecules. The **tongue** senses fire (*teja*) or heat or decay. While *smell* is the minute dispersal of matter as it decomposes, *taste* reflects the internal physical change (eg the tastlessness of an unripe fruit, its sweetness on ripening, and rancidity when rotting). The **body** senses the earth (*paṭhavī*), or what occupies space, that is, mass, which is really *hardness, softness, smoothness, roughness, and resistance*.<sup>21</sup>

What I have given here is not orthodox Buddhist teachings, but a personal reflection on the possible connections between the five physical senses and the five elements (earth, water, fire, wind and space). This reflection is based on the understanding that whatever any of the physical senses detect is some aspect of form (*rūpa*) as the four elements.

It is the mind (*mano*) and mind-consciousness (*mano,viññāṇa*) which make sense of all the physical experiences. And here is where the teachings of **the Bahu,dhātuka Sutta** (M 115)—which speaks of the mind-element, the mind-object element, and the mind-consciousness element<sup>22</sup>—throws some light in our current discussion. **The mind-element** (*mano,dhātu*), according to Abhidhamma, includes the consciousness that adverts to the five sense-objects impinging on the five physical sense-faculties (*pañca.dvār'-āvajjana,citta*) and the consciousness that receives the object after it has been cognized through the senses (*sampaṭicchana,citta*).<sup>23</sup>

**The mind-object element** (*dhamma,dhātu*) includes the types of subtle material phenomena not involved in sense-cognition, the three mental aggregates of feeling, perception, and formations, and nirvana. It does not include concepts, abstract ideas, judgements, etc. Though these latter ideas are incl in the notion of mind-object (*dhamm'ārammaṇa*), the mind-object *element* includes only things that exist by their own nature, not things constructed by the mind.<sup>24</sup>

**The mind-consciousness element** (*mano.viññāṇa,dhātu*) includes all types of consciousness except the five sense-consciousnesses and the mind-element. In other words, it consists of purely mental events. And this is “where” synaesthesia or the interacting and overlapping of sense-experiences occur. The mind is the master creator, conjuror, and con-artist who manipulates the sense inputs, stores them and cues them on the stage of consciousness under the directorship of the latent tendencies of lust, aversion and ignorance.

In other words, synaesthesia is ever occurring in our subconscious, and we may or may not notice this. Or more likely, we choose increasingly not to notice it as we mature by our predispositions and by external conditionings. Once our minds become overly analytical at the cost of wholesome feelings, we refuse to acknowledge the multiple-sense creativity that the artistic mind or meditative mind is capable of.

On a deep meditation level, when the physical body, that is, the five physical senses, cease altogether (at least for the duration of the samadhi, the mind<sup>25</sup> works on itself *synaesthetically*. It starts off as a wonder world of supersensory forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches of such exquisite pleasure and peace. These synaesthetic glory meld every closer together through the dhyanic experience, so that in the fourth dhyana, they unify as a single-minded stillness of supreme bliss.

— — —

<sup>21</sup> See **Mahā Hatthipadopama S** (M 28.6-27/1185-191) = SD 6.16; **Rāhul'ovāda S** (M 62.8-17/1:421-426) = SD 3.11; & **Dhātu Vibhaṅga S** (M 140.13-18/3:240-242) = SD 4.17. See also **Rūpa** = SD 17.2a.

<sup>22</sup> M 115.4/3:62 = SD 29.1.

<sup>23</sup> See **Nimitta & Anuvyañjana** = SD 19.14 (2).

<sup>24</sup> See M:ÑB 1324 n1077.

<sup>25</sup> In keeping with the early Buddhist spirit, I have not differentiated any type of mind here: on *viññāṇa*, *mano* and *citta*, see **Viññāṇa** = SD 17.8a (12).

## The Discourse to the Brahmin Uṇṇābha

(S 48.42/5:217-219)

### 1 Originating at Sāvattihī.

#### Uṇṇābha questions the Buddha

2 Then the Brahmin Uṇṇābha approached the Blessed One and exchanged greetings with him. When this courteous and friendly exchange was concluded, he sat down at one side. Sitting thus as one side, the brahmin Uṇṇābha said this to the Blessed One:

3a “Master Gotama, these five faculties have five different ranges, five different fields. They do not experience each others’ range or domain.”<sup>26</sup>

3b What are the five?

- (1) The eye-faculty,
- (2) the ear-faculty,
- (3) the nose-faculty,
- (4) the tongue-faculty,
- (5) the body-faculty. [218]

Now, master Gotama, since these five faculties have five different ranges, five different fields, they do not experience each others’ range or domain.

So what is it that they resort to? What is it that experiences their range or domain?

#### The range of the five faculties

4 “Brahmin, these five faculties have five different ranges, five different fields. *They do not experience each others’ range or domain.*

What are the five?

- (1) The eye-faculty,
- (2) the ear-faculty,
- (3) the nose-faculty,
- (4) the tongue-faculty,
- (5) the body-faculty.

Now, brahmin, these five faculties have five different ranges, five different fields, and they do not experience each others’ range or domain.

Brahmin, they have the mind as resort,<sup>27</sup> and the mind experiences their range and field.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *Pañc’imāni, bho gotama, indriyāni nānā,visayāni nānā,gocarāni, na aññam-aññassa gocara,visayaṃ paccanubhonti.* The same dialogue is found in **Mahā Vedalla S** (M 43.21/1:295), but there clearly the *physical* faculties are meant; for, its foll section (“On what do these five faculties stand dependent on?” *Imāni āvuso pañc’indriyāni kiṃ paṭucca tiṭṭhanti*), the answer is that they stand mutually dependent on vitality (*āyu*) and heat (*usmā*) (M 43.22/1:295). Here in **Brāhmaṇa Uṇṇābha S**, they seem to correspond to the five sense-consciousnesses, “for the physical sense faculties cannot properly be said to experience (*paccanubhoti*) an objective domain (*visaya*) or resort (*gocara*) [“range or field”]. Their function is only to serve as the media through which consciousness cognizes objects.” (S:B 1936 n225)

<sup>27</sup> *Mano,patisaraṇa*: see Intro (1).

<sup>28</sup> Be *Mano patisaraṇam, mano va [vī ca] n’esaṃ gocaravisayaṃ paccanubhotī.* Comy explains that *mano* here is the mind-door impulsion (*javana*), which experiences the object by way of lust, hate or delusion (SA 3:245). **Bodhi**: “In my view, this introduces an unnecessary ethical slant on the passage, which I take to be primarily epistemic in import. I interpret the sentence simply to mean that mind-consciousness has access to the data provided by the five types of sense consciousnesses, which it collates, categorizes, and interprets with its own stock-in-trade, namely, concepts.” (S:B 1936 n226).

### The progress of the training

5 “But, master Gotama, what is it that the mind resorts to?”

“The mind’s resort, brahmin, is mindfulness.”<sup>29</sup>

6 “But, master Gotama, what is it that mindfulness resorts to?”

“Mindfulness’ resort, brahmin, is liberation.”<sup>30</sup>

7a “But, master Gotama, what is it that liberation resorts to?”

“Liberation’s resort, brahmin, is nirvana.”<sup>31</sup>

7b “But, master Gotama, what is it that nirvana resorts to?”

“Brahmin, you have exceeded the question! You are unable to grasp the limit of the question.”<sup>32</sup>

8 For, brahmin, the holy life is lived with nirvana as its form footing, as its final end, nirvana as its utter end.<sup>33</sup>

### Uṇṇābha becomes a non-returner

9 Then the brahmin Uṇṇābha, having delighted and rejoiced in the Blessed One’s word, rose from his seat, saluted the Blessed One, and keeping the Blessed One on his right, departed.

10 Then, not long after the Brahmin Uṇṇābha had left, the Blessed One addressed the monks, thus:

11 “Suppose, bhikshus, in a gabled house, or a gabled house with a hall, outside the eastern window, the sun were rising. When its rays enter through the window, where would they settle?”

“On the western wall, bhante.” [219]

12 “Even so, bhikshus, the brahmin Uṇṇābha has gained faith in the Tathagata that is settled, well rooted, established, firm, so that it cannot be removed by any ascetic or brahmin or deva or Māra or brahma or by anyone else in the world.

If, bhikshus, the brahmin Uṇṇābha were to die at this time, there is no fetter bound by which the brahmin Uṇṇābha might again come to this world.”<sup>34</sup>

— evaṃ — 090624; 090702; 090815; 100125

<sup>29</sup> *Manassa kho, brāhmaṇa, sati paṭisaraṇaṃ.*

<sup>30</sup> *Satiyā kho, brāhmaṇa, vimutti paṭisaraṇaṃ ti.* Comy: Mindfulness is the path, liberation is the fruition (SA 3:245).

<sup>31</sup> *Vimuttiyā kho, brāhmaṇa, nibbānaṃ paṭisaraṇaṃ.*

<sup>32</sup> *Be accayāsi* [Ce Ke Se *accasarā* (aor of *atisarati*, “he transgresses”); Ee Ka *ajjhaparam* (wr)], *brāhmaṇa, pañhaṃ, nāsakkhi pañhassa pariyantaṃ gahetuṃ.* Both *accayāsi* and *accasarā* are applicable here. Ee *assa* and *ajjhaparam* here are prob MS errors. This and the foll para as in **Cūḷa Vedalla S** (M 44.29/1:304) & the closing of **(Khandha) Māra S** (S 23.1/3:189).

<sup>33</sup> *Nibbānōgadhaṃ hi, brāhmaṇa, brahma, cariyāṃ vussati nibbāna, parāyaṇaṃ nibbāna, pariyoṣānaṃ ti.* As at **(Khandha) Māra S** (S 23.1/3:189). Many translators have taken *nibbānōgadha* as “to plunge into Nibbāna” (S:W 5:193), or “immersion in Nibbāna” (M:H 31:67), or “immersion in Nibbāna” (Walshe, Wheel ser 318-321, 1985); ie taking *ogadha* as der from *ogāhati* (“he plunges”). This tr is encouraged by Comy where it connects *ogadha* with *ogāha* (“a plunge”). Comy here, eg, has “*nibbānōgadha* means the interior of nirvana, having entered (immersed) into nirvana” (*nibbānōgadhaṃ ti nibbān’abbhantaram nibbānaṃ anupaviṭṭham*) (SA 3:246). But *ogadha* (cf Skt *gādha*), “firm footing (in water), firm ground; a ford (U 6.5/70\*; cf A 7.15.7b/4:12), fits the context better. Comys often treat vb *ogādhati* as synonymous with *patiṭṭhahati*, “to be established,” and consistently gloss *ogadha* with *patiṭṭhā*, “support” (AA 2:267; UA 345,21-22; cf ItA 1:112,11). Cf **Nakula S** (A 6.16): “found a firm footing,” (*ogādha-p.patta*) (A 6.16.2f+4/3:297) = SD 5.2. See CPD & DPL: *ogadha*, *ogādhati*, *ogāha*. SED def Skt *gādha* (from √GADH, “to stand firmly”) as “offering firm standing-ground, fordable (as a river).” However, both figurative senses—“plunges in, immersed in” (*ogadha* from *ogāhati*) or as “a firm footing” (*ogadha* from *ogādhati*)—are applicable here: see R Gethin, *Sayings of the Buddha*, 2008: 290 n227.

<sup>34</sup> *Imamhi ce, bhikkhave, samaye uṇṇābho brāhmaṇo kālaṃ, kareyya, n’atthi saṃyojanaṃ yena saṃyojanaṃ saṃyutto uṇṇābho brāhmaṇo puna imaṃ lokam āgaccheyyā ti.* This means that he is a non-returner. Comy however uses the term “dhyana non-returner” (*jhāna, anāgāmita*), meaning that he is a streamwinner who had abandoned the 5 hindrances by the 1<sup>st</sup> dhyana. If he were to die in dhyana, he would be reborn in a higher world and attain nirvana there, but if he were to fall from dhyana, he would be unable to do so and his destiny undetermined. However, he succeeds, and so the Buddha declares that he is a dhyana non-returner (SA 3:246). Cf Kvu 43(*jhānānāgāmita*); AA 5:77. This term is rare and only found in these refs.

Cf S 21.63.11b/2:99 = SD 20.6.